

Sermon for 11th February 2024 – Year B – Last before Lent

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Mark 9:2-9

Sermon

Back in 2015 when I had just been recommended for ordination, I was living in Devon in the diocese of Exeter and the Bishop summoned me for a final interview before sending me off to theological college.

Now, Bishop Robert was a slightly intimidating person, perhaps because he'd been an austere and holy monk for 10 years before being ordained. Without much small talk, he immediately launched into his first question: 'Who was Jesus' for me? Did I prefer to see him as a good teacher and miracle worker, friend to the lowly, healer of the sick, defender of the oppressed? Or was I more attracted to him as divine Son of God, Lord of heaven and earth, king of the universe?

I admit I was a bit like a rabbit in the headlights. Why was the bishop asking me this? Was it some kind of test? Was there a wrong answer that might lead to me not being ordained after all?

I imagine the disciples, Peter, James, and John were panicked in much the same way on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured before them in glory. They've only just figured out that Jesus is the Messiah, who they assume will be a military leader, and now there's this blinding light, the reappearance of Moses and Elijah, and Almighty God speaking to them from a cloud. Just who *is* this Jesus guy?

Like most of humanity, the disciples' attention was still mostly on their worldly goals. They were determined to make Jesus the hero of their own ambition. In chapter 8, Peter recognised Jesus as the Messiah, but then he objected when Jesus said his vocation was to be rejected and killed. The disciples didn't get it

because their assumption was that Jesus would lead a war against the Roman occupiers, not die on the Cross. Even *after* this mind-blowing transfiguration on the mountain, they come down and immediately start arguing about who among them is the greatest.

Jesus' glory on the mountaintop tears this horizontal worldly ambition from top to bottom. He makes the sign of the cross over the whole tapestry of history and makes it plain that whatever we think is going on from our human perspective, God's glory breaks through reminding us that there is another, far greater – and yet far more humbling – story going on.

It's not that the complexities of our lives become irrelevant in the light of God's story, but that we are suddenly given a completely different perspective on everything. God's sudden appearance in a situation shows up all our human social constructions as just too insubstantial to contain the bubbling creativity of the really Real.

Anyone who has had a mountaintop experience, whether on a literal mountain or a metaphorical one, will know that it changes you. Things that were massively important before, suddenly don't seem quite so significant, and other things take their place. When St Julian of Norwich had a profound revelation of God's love, she chose to spend the rest of her life walled up in a single room by a church, contemplating what it all might mean. Others give up successful careers and wealth and power and become monks and nuns or take up roles in society that are more in line with the divine love they have so very briefly experienced.

God's glory, it seems, is only ever revealed for a moment, and then it's veiled again. Revealed, and then veiled. Revealed and then veiled. Mountaintop experiences, however profound, always end. The important thing is not the experience itself, but the wider perspective it gives us. Our brittle old wineskins are replaced by supple new ones that can stretch and transcend our self-centredness.

And then we go on; in some ways changed, in other ways perhaps not so much. James and John, who actually *witnessed* the transfiguration, who heard God say, “This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him!” they go to Jesus and ask to be seated at his left and his right in his glory. They still don’t understand that Jesus’ glory is not one of power, but of giving up power, of humiliation, of going to the Cross, which is the inevitable consequence when the vertical revelation of God’s self-emptying love intersects with the distorted horizontal world of human ambition, with all its fear and hatred, greed, violence, and despair.

But are transfigurations only in the past? Are they only stories now? Well, I don’t know about you, but I think they go on all the time, typically when we least expect it. An insight comes out of the blue and the narrow letterbox of our perspective widens into an Imax cinema and our eyes go wide in astonishment and recognition of something so profound that it makes us want to reevaluate our entire lives.

I could tell you some of mine and how my life changed, and how I’m poorer now but infinitely more rich; I could tell you about how God convinced me to stop hating myself and judging my mother, just by slipping a thought into my head that we’re both equally beloved children of God. I’m sure you must have many of your own encounters with transfiguration. Perhaps you’ll share one or two with me and with each other, when the time is right. I always love to hear what our beloved Lord is up to.

There is of course one transfiguration that we always share together, every week, and it’s called the Eucharist. We gather together with our horizontal concerns; arm in arm we come to the table with all our anxieties. And through the historical words of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is called into the bread and wine and it, and we, become the body of Christ together. So, may our eyes be opened to see his glory, in us and around us, the glory of God’s beloved son, full of grace and truth.